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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The phenomenon of children fighting wars has drawn the attention of the media, international policymakers and advocates of child rights in recent years. 2002 saw the entry into force of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. Of an estimated 300,000 children thought to be fighting wars around the world, nearly half are found in Africa. The cumulative total of children who have been co-opted into fighting in the past decades is subject to only rough estimation. Why such a concentration in Africa? Viewed out of context, the problem of child soldiers appears as an incomprehensible and aberrant breakdown of civilization; the norms and values that protect children seem to have vanished, or worse, never existed. Within a historical and universal context, however, a picture emerges in which families', communities' and states' ability to protect and nurture children is chronically undermined. Children have become the object of predatory rebel movements and government forces alike, for a lack of adult manpower, for their very developmental characteristics and the ease with which they can be politically and militarily mobilized. Far from being a product of 'African culture' or 'tradition', the recruitment and deployment of children is a symptom of the socio-economic and political instability that wracks a demographically young continent; around half of the population of Africa consists of children. The notion of voluntarism is debated: can a child make a rational decision to take up arms and fight a war he or she could not possibly understand? Recruitment methods vary from the brutally coercive to the more subtle and political. From any approach, African children are forced to make decisions beyond their years, whether facing the barrel of a rifle or facing exclusion, hunger and hardship. The consequences are yet poorly understood. Children and families experience loss and trauma, children become simultaneously victims and perpetrators of violence. Thus socialized, they are then faced with reintegrating into societies fragmented and economically devastated by war, sometimes as adults who were recruited as children and demobilized many years later. This monograph places the issue in context by dispelling the notion that child soldiers are somehow a product of African culture and associated with particular 'tribal', 'brutal' or 'uncivilized' characteristics of the continent.

It gives a comprehensive overview of approaches to the study of child soldiers, and makes an appeal for the special consideration of girl soldiers, for whom the experience of war can profoundly differ from that of boys. This monograph lays the foundation for further research and publications from Interact, which will include studies on the political dimensions of youth and armed conflict, on the challenges of reintegration faced by children and youth, children in peace processes and on children, armed conflict and HIV/AIDS.

INTRODUCTION

This study is an explorative, descriptive as well as analytical account of the problem of child soldiering in Africa, based mainly on literature reviews. It also draws extensively on programme and conference reports as well as newspaper and journal articles. Primary fieldwork is not included. Examples used in the study will focus on Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Uganda and Mozambique as well as Liberia and Angola.

Section 1 reviews the phenomenon of child soldiers by situating it within a historical and universal context, as well as by examining the changing nature of armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War and the extent to which, this has facilitated the use of children in conflicts. Section 2 outlines the background to some of the wars in Africa and the economic and political agendas that incite and prolong them. Section 3 then proceeds to analyse the use of children in modern day African conflicts and examines the consequences of child soldiering on children and their communities with a particular focus on Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Uganda, Mozambique, Angola and Liberia. Finally, Section 4 considers the much-neglected subject of the specific experiences of girl combatants during civil wars in various African countries.

Background

The end of the Cold War, which had dominated regional and world politics from the 1950s to the early 1990s, raised hopes for an end to super power conflict and its attendant proxy wars in various parts of the world. However, in reality, it signified the intensification of the modern conception of civil wars, which tend to be fought internally, within the boundaries of a state and between one or more insurgent groups and the ruling government. In this new environment civilians bear the brunt of the violence as the statistics clearly illustrate: 90% of victims are non-combatants—mainly women and children. During the 1990s more than two million children died as a result of war and more than 3 times that number were permanently disabled or seriously injured. Additionally, 20 million children are among the refugees and internally displaced scattered

around the world.¹ The main sphere of violence now tends to be the village or the town centre rather than a far-flung battlefield typical of conventional warfare.² As a result, entire communities are drawn into the conflict either as aggressors, victims or both at different times. The horrors of the atrocities carried out in modern wars are emphasised by the fact that very often, they are committed by former neighbours, friends or fellow village members. Light weapons such as the Soviet AK-47 and the G-3 feature prominently in post-Cold War conflicts, transforming local conflicts "into bloody slaughter."³ This, in turn, facilitates the incorporation of children into what are often referred to as 'adult wars'.

It was during the 1980s that the phenomenon of child soldiers first attracted widespread international attention. Over 20 years later it is estimated that at any one time there are around 300,000 children under the age of eighteen years (male and female) currently participating in conflicts in more than 30 countries worldwide either as combatants or as auxiliaries.⁴ Consequently, the cumulative total is staggering. In all, the last decade has witnessed the active participation of one million children in various wars. However, due to the scarcity of reliable documentation and the fact that most armed groups, including government forces, deny their existence, the exact number of child soldiers is difficult to assess and thus, they remain 'invisible'. While most child combatants are aged between fifteen and eighteen years, the youngest recorded age is seven.⁵

Of the estimated 300,000 child soldiers in the world, 120,000 can be found in Africa alone. This fact is of particular concern because Africa is not only the world's poorest region, but it also consists of its youngest populations. According to Peters and Richards, whilst five to twenty-five year olds account for only 25% of the population in Europe and North America and for 35% in Asia, in Africa they comprise an overwhelming 45% of the population.⁶ This deadly cocktail of violence, poverty and large numbers of disaffected youth does not bode well for the welfare and development of children, their communities, nations and the future.

Much contention has surrounded the definition of the terms 'child' and 'childhood', with postmodernists such as Dasberg and Veerman leading the 'cultural relativist call' for acknowledging the differences between peoples and societies and the need to respect and maintain these differences. This monograph will adopt a human rights perspective based on the argument acknowledged by RE Howard that, although not universal in origin, human rights are now, in principle, universally applicable.⁷ One international legal instrument

renowned for its 'universality' is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and made binding to States Parties in September 1990. The Convention has now been ratified by all countries except two (the United States and Somalia), emphasising for many, its universality. According to the Convention, a child is "every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier."⁸ Since the geographical focus of this monograph is Africa, it is necessary to note that the definition of a child stipulated by the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, produced by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU),⁹ is consistent with that of the UNCRC.

The working definition of the term 'child soldier' used in this monograph is encapsulated in the Cape Town Principles, an agreement adopted by participants attending a symposium organised by UNICEF in Cape Town in April 1997. Thus, a child soldier is:

Any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. It includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.¹⁰

Since the problem of children in armed conflict has only recently been pushed onto the international stage, theoretical discourses on the subject are relatively few. Most of the work that has been done in this area has been based on fieldwork research and linked to the programmes of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Thus, there is a growing need for a theoretical framework within which the discussion, design and implementation of programmes for the prevention and rehabilitation of child soldiers can be situated.

The existing theoretical framework lends itself to a powerful debate on various aspects of the subject. Firstly, Brett and McCallin¹¹ emphasise the 'invisibility' of child soldiers. This factor underlines one of the main problems associated with researching the subject—the dearth of reliable and valid information about this category of children. Secondly, using existing reliable information, Honwana¹² dispels the myth that child soldiering is a modern or African phenomenon by incorporating a historical and global account into her study as well as focusing specifically on Angola and Mozambique. Thirdly, with regards to the reasons behind the use of children in conflict, Abdullah and

Muana highlight the importance of socio-economic factors, which not only lead to violent conflict, but also facilitate the participation of children and youth in war. Fourthly, the Coalition against the Use of Child Soldiers offers yet another useful perspective by linking the phenomenon to a deliberate military strategy adopted by some armed groups and governments. Fifthly, whilst Richards (1996) and McConnan respectively argue that in Sierra Leone young people volunteered for war for their own clear and rational reasons, including survival, Machel amongst other commentators, dismisses the idea of 'volunteerism', arguing that when the only options are survival or death/poverty, the choices of the children can hardly be called free and fair. Sixthly, with regards to the involvement of girls in wars, Nordstrom emphasises 'the silences and empty spaces' surrounding discussions on the impact of armed conflict on girls. Finally, Mazurana and colleagues criticise the available documentation on this group of girls for its insistence on focusing on them as mainly sex slaves and victims of sexual terror and not taking into account the other roles they play including that of active combatants.

On the wider subject of children's rights, proponents of cultural relativism have criticised the UNCRC by arguing that childhood is a relative concept that changes "according to historical time, geographical environment, local culture, and socio-economic conditions".¹³ With specific regard to children in armed conflict, this camp has argued that the practice of recruiting child soldiers can be justified as an African cultural tradition.¹⁴ However, Bennett questions this perspective and turns to history for an answer. He cogently asserts:

The successful justification of a morally suspect social practice on the grounds of culture needs an audience sympathetic to cultural relativism...more specifically to persuade a human rights activist that using children in armed combat is right or legitimate would require a high degree of tolerance for deviation from the clear prohibition laid down in the international code of children's rights.¹⁵

These are indeed valid debates that have underlined numerous academic works, conferences and reports, illustrating the growing importance of children involved in armed conflicts in the international arena since the adoption of the UNCRC by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989.

This monograph is situated within this broad theoretical framework with a view to furthering the discourse and paving the way for considerations of alternative analytical frameworks on the phenomenon of child soldiering. In

order to reach a satisfactory understanding certain key questions must be considered: Can the use of children in African armed conflicts be attributed to culture and thus, tradition? Or can we attribute it to the political and economic agendas often driving the conflicts? What, if anything, has gone awry with the notion of childhood in Africa to allow children to be involved in conflicts? And in reversal, what impact does child soldiering have on the notion of childhood in Africa? Important sub questions are: why do children join wars in many African conflicts? Are they forced or do they have their own agency and volunteer? To what extent do girls experience conflict differently from their male colleagues and how do they contribute actively to warfare?

The evidence suggests that the use of children in armed conflict is a socio-economic phenomenon, often representing pragmatic and deliberate military strategies. It also suggests that the incorporation of thousands of children into conflicts across the continent is not a result of African tradition or a dysfunctional notion of childhood in Africa; rather child soldiering itself is affecting culture.

CHAPTER ONE

AN OVERVIEW OF CHILD SOLDIERING

Child soldiering has indeed become a disturbing characteristic of modern conflict but it is not a recent phenomenon. According to numerous accounts, the involvement of children in wars has a long history. As clearly indicated by its name, many children participated in the Children's Crusade of 1212; in fact, large numbers of its 30,000 child crusaders were sold into slavery and many more drowned in the Mediterranean Sea. In modern history, it has been suggested that Napoleon's army in the early 19th century featured a number of twelve year-old boy combatants.¹⁶ More recently, stories of boys lying about their age in order to join the army as a sign of patriotism during the First and Second World Wars are widespread.

This historical precedent notwithstanding, the post Second World War period has become known as the 'era of the child soldier'.¹⁷ This is mainly due to the radical transformations in the nature of armed conflict, which has not only led to the increase in the number of children involved in conflicts, but has also altered the nature of their contribution to the conflict.

The post-Cold War period has been marked by a dramatic change in the nature of armed conflict globally as most wars are now intra-state rather than inter-state. This has resulted in the blurring of the distinction between combatants and civilians as communities are now at the heart of warfare. Furthermore, these conflicts tend to linger with escalations and de-escalations thereby prolonging violence and instability (with benefits to some of the participants), and this, in turn, leads to an increased casualty in adult men. This factor encourages warring factions to turn to children to fill these vacant military roles.

Modern conflicts are characterised by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons such as grenades and AK-47s as opposed to the nuclear and biological weapons of the Cold War era. The development of the light weapons trade "takes the child soldier from the margins to the very heart of modern conflicts".¹⁸ An AK-47 or M16 transforms a ten or twelve year-old child into "an effective instrument of destruction".¹⁹ This is because an AK-47, for

example, which fires thirty bullets per trigger pull, is light enough for a ten year-old to handle and costs no more than a goat, chicken or loaf of bread in some parts of Africa.

International standards have also contributed to the child soldier phenomenon. In 1977 the two Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, which extended protection to all non-combatants and to military personnel no longer engaged in combat, prohibited the recruitment and participation in conflicts only of children under the age of fifteen years, with a weak rider that, in recruiting those aged between fifteen and eighteen years, governments should “endeavour to give priority to the oldest”.²⁰ In 1989 the UNCRC compounded the situation. Although the Convention defined a child in general as anyone below the age of eighteen years, it allowed the age of protection for children to be explicitly lowered with regards to military service—leaving children between the ages of fifteen and eighteen vulnerable to recruitment. Based on these existing standards, the Statute of the International Criminal Court, adopted in Rome in 1998, made it a war crime for both governments and armed opposition groups to recruit children under the age of fifteen or use them in national, regional and international conflicts. Thus, by avoiding addressing the recruitment of children between the ages of fifteen and eighteen the international community reinforced the idea that recruiting adolescents was acceptable.

The above factors have facilitated the involvement of children in armed conflict to such an extent that it is now widely recognised as a child labour problem. In fact, in June 1999 the International Labour Organisation (ILO) adopted Convention 182, which included forced and compulsory recruitment of children under the age of eighteen years among the worst forms of child labour and thereby, opened up new possibilities of protection and enforcement.²¹ In less than three years this convention has been ratified by 132 countries, making it a record in ILO history.

Other legal instruments pushing previous limits have since emerged. In January 2000, after six years of negotiations, governments around the world agreed on a new international treaty to prohibit the use of children in armed conflicts: the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on the involvement of children in armed conflict. In May 2000 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the protocol and it was opened for signature the following month. Having achieved the ten ratifications needed, the protocol came into force on 12th February 2002. This protocol raises the minimum age for recruitment from fifteen to eighteen years and prohibits

the use in conflict of children under the age of eighteen by all armed groups. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child was another landmark agreement as it was the first regional treaty to establish eighteen as the minimum age for all recruitment and participation in warfare; it came into force on 29th November 1999.

Furthermore, in August 1999, the UN Security Council passed resolution 1261, which instructs the Secretary-General to act on behalf of children affected by armed conflict, including child soldiers and to ensure the training in children's rights of peacekeepers deployed by the Security Council under the Secretary-General. Since then the Security Council has passed two more significant resolutions:

- Resolution 1314 (August 2000) was passed following the publication of a comprehensive report by the current Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, in July 2000 on the implementation of Resolution 1261. This resolution emphasised the responsibility of all countries to exclude from amnesty arrangements anyone responsible for grave crimes against children. It also called for measures against the illicit trade in natural resources such as diamonds, which fuels wars and contributes to the massive victimisation of children. Furthermore, this resolution stressed the importance of addressing the special needs and vulnerabilities of girls affected by armed conflict.
- Similar to its predecessor, Resolution 1379 (November 2001) was passed following the publication of a report by the Secretary-General on 7th September 2001 on the implementation of Resolution 1314. This resolution acknowledged the importance of including child protection advisers in peacekeeping operations and called for all parties to conflicts to take measures to put an end to all forms of violence and exploitation, including sexual violence, particularly rape which disproportionately affects girls—be they combatants or civilians.

Geographical Distribution

It is essential to realise that child soldiering is not limited to Africa as is often portrayed by the Western media. The global dimensions of the involvement of children in armed conflict cannot be ignored. The United Nations study on the 'Impact of Armed Conflict on Children' led by Graça Machel cogently asserted that "child soldiering is a global problem that occurs more systematically than

most analysts have previously suspected".²² The facts themselves are revealing. Since the inception of war against the Sri Lankan government in 1983, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), also known as the Tamil Tigers, has incorporated thousands of children into the war. In fact, the LTTE established two armed units consisting entirely of children. The case of Myanmar is particularly illustrative. Despite repeated denials from the government, Myanmar is believed to have more child soldiers than any other country in the world; more than 70,000 children may currently be serving in the national army alone, making the government of that country the greatest single global user of children as soldiers. The national armed forces are known to forcibly recruit children as young as eleven years old. It is also important to note that the various opposition factions in Myanmar also co-opt children into their ranks, but on a much smaller scale; the 'rebel' group consisting of the largest number of child combatants (20,000) is the United Wa State Army (UWSA).²³

In addition, children have been used by both government and opposition forces in armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burma, Cambodia, Chechnya, Columbia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Lebanon, Turkey and the former Yugoslavia-to name but a few. In the so-called West, the example of Northern Ireland, where children are used by paramilitaries, is particularly noteworthy. It is crucial to take into account the fact that many Western governments recruit under-eighteens (albeit voluntarily and with parental consent) into their regular forces. Until recently it was legal for the UK not only to recruit sixteen year olds, but also to deploy under-eighteens in wars such as the Falklands conflict and the Gulf War. However, in March 2002 the British Ministry of Defence issued a statement declaring that soldiers under the age of eighteen will no longer be allowed to go into battle, even though the armed forces will still be allowed to train recruits from the age of sixteen. It is further believed that an unspecified number of soldiers from the 45 Commando contingent, sent to war against Al-Qaida and the Taliban forces in Afghanistan in 2001, were withdrawn for being under the age of eighteen.²⁴

However, it has to be acknowledged that a large proportion of child combatants are indeed to be found in Africa today. Thus, it is necessary to further examine the reasons inciting and fostering this phenomenon.

Civil Wars in Africa

The African continent has been ravaged by internal conflicts and insurgencies in the past decade. Eighteen of the fifty-three countries on the continent are

currently involved with, or emerging from, armed conflict.²⁵ Violent conflicts have devastated countries such as Algeria, Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic (CAR), Congo-Brazzaville, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Eritrea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. The outbreak of violence in Côte d'Ivoire in September 2002, has further exacerbated the political instability of the West African sub-region. An in-depth analysis of the causes and dynamics of modern armed conflicts in Africa is not only beyond the scope of this monograph, but they have been well-documented elsewhere.²⁶ However, a brief analysis is necessary to properly situate the subject of children in armed conflicts and to appreciate the reasons behind their deployment across the continent.

Some commentators have viewed these conflicts as irrational and senseless or dismissed them as ethnically-derived, pointing to the atavistic nature of the 'tribal' people inhabiting these countries. One such commentator, Kaplan, has postulated that in modern African wars, "a pre-modern formlessness governed the battlefield, recalling the wars in tribal or feudal Europe before the Peace of Westphalia introduced the era of organized nation-states".²⁷

Indeed, recent African civil wars have been particularly brutal and bloody. Violence against civilians, a characteristic of modern warfare, has been excessive and extremely explicit. In Sierra Leone, villagers were forced to watch public beheadings in which "the victim's neck was cut, working from back to front with a blunt blade".²⁸ Civilians were also mutilated and maimed. There were two particular ways of torture common to the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia which should be described: *tabay* and *halaka*. To *tabay* a person involved tying them so tightly with wet ropes that their arms and shoulders were permanently damaged. *Halaka* was a system whereby civilians were stripped naked, had their arms and feet tied, and "beaten from point to point while lying prone".²⁹ In Liberia, women were raped by friends of their sons. One child soldier, fighting for Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), was forced to bayonet his pregnant sister to show his loyalty to the force.³⁰ The Rwandan genocide provides examples of some of the worst atrocities known to man. Women and children were tortured, buried alive, burnt or hacked to death. Babies had their heads smashed against walls as their parents watched. Women were raped in front of their husbands and children and then had to watch whilst their families were killed before they were. The Prime Minister of Rwanda, Madame Agathe Uwilingiyimana, was forced to strip naked in the presence of her mother, husband and children, before being bayoneted through the vagina repeatedly until the bayonet emerged through her throat.³¹

For many, these atrocities are incomprehensible; some ascribe them to barbarism and 'tribalism', with its pejorative connotation of 'primitiveness'.³² Although these acts are difficult to comprehend, this monograph argues that it is necessary to reach a better understanding of the political and economic forces inciting and driving these conflicts and their attendant atrocities. Sierra Leone, Liberia and Rwanda are informative examples.

Sierra Leone

The war in Sierra Leone, which resulted in the deaths of over 30,000 civilians as well as the displacement of over half of the country's population both internally and externally, begun when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), led by Foday Sankoh, invaded the country from Liberia (where they had been exiles) at two diamond-rich points: Bomaru in Kailahun District and Mano River Bridge, Pujehun District on 23rd March 1991.

This invasion was characterised by extreme violence but it is necessary to consider the socio-economic context within which the war emerged. At the outbreak of war, there had been a growing resentment towards the authoritarian regime of the All People's Congress (APC), which had been in power since 1968. Corruption in all sectors was rife. It was also believed that because of government neglect, the health and sanitation services had deteriorated and this, in turn had led to an alleged life expectancy of twenty-one years in 1987.³³ Since the middle of the 1980s the education system had also suffered; this was partly due to the conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank as part of their structural adjustment package for Sierra Leone, which is now ranked as the poorest country in the world. This led Richards to conclude that,

The crisis of patrimonialism has had a devastating effect on schooling, social services, jobs and national communications infrastructure—which had blighted the hopes of most young people for meaningful life in the cities.³⁴

It is also important to consider the factors, which prolonged the conflict. By capturing the diamond-rich areas of Kailahun and Pujehun districts, the RUF was able to embark on the illegal mining and exporting of diamonds. With regards to the government, Keen coined the term, the 'privatization of war' and used it to argue that due to IMF and World Bank austerity programmes, the government of Sierra Leone, like many other African governments, was

‘strapped for cash’.³⁵ Hence, they paid their supporters in kind by giving them the right to inflict violence and freedom to loot. The continuation of violence also allowed soldiers to remain posted in resource-rich districts. According to Abdullah and Muana, the government soldiers of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) fighting at the war front, freely admitted to living off the brutal exploitation of civilians in the war.³⁶ In addition, prolonging the war meant that it would not be possible to hold elections and so the government could continue its rule. These factors have led some commentators to suggest that for most of the participants, the purpose of the war is not to win it, but rather to profit from it (financially and otherwise) while it lasts.³⁷ It is not surprising that Sierra Leone has recently been ranked as one of the worst places to be a child, second only to Angola which ranked first.³⁸

Liberia

The Liberian civil war, which officially ended in July 1997 but continues to fester violently today, began on 24th December 1989 when the NPFL, led by Charles Taylor, attacked a border town in Nimba County from neighbouring Côte d’Ivoire. During the war an estimated 200,000 people died and approximately 700,000 fled the country. Like the Sierra Leonean war, the conflict in Liberia was characterised by excessive brutality.

Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, president of the country at the outbreak of war, had himself come to power via a violent coup d’état by the lower ranks in the army in April 1980. Since Liberian history is often framed in relation to the history of the domination of Americo-Liberians over the indigenous populations, some commentators have argued that the 1980 coup was “to end Americo-Liberian minority rule and usher in indigenous Liberian majority rule”.³⁹ In order to secure his position and fight off all rivals, Doe, a Krahn, sought the support of the Krahn and Mandingo communities by favouring them with jobs and commercial opportunities among other perks. According to Ellis, after violently suppressing a coup attempt by his major rival, Thomas Quiwonkpa in 1985, Doe “resorted to a particularly poisonous form of ethnic manipulation which was to have consequences in the ethnic pogroms of 1990”.⁴⁰ Ellis adds that it was this blatant manipulation of ethnic alliances for Doe’s personal aspirations and greed that made the Krahns and Mandingos so unpopular, especially in Nimba County. To worsen the situation, by the outbreak of war and the ensuing violence, the Liberian economy was in decline, public institutions had been grossly mismanaged, the government had become more autocratic and over-militarised and national debt was

increasing rapidly. Dunn's description of the impact of the rebellion on Liberian society is apt, "the society was on the verge of collapse when the insurgency gave it a final shove".⁴¹

Shortly after the insurgency the NPFL (or put in another way, Taylor himself) came to control most of the country outside Monrovia including Nimba County where the most valuable iron ore deposits in the world are located. Taylor also had access to other valuable resources such as gold, diamonds, hardwood and other commodities and he quickly came to realise that he could export the goods with which to maintain his rule over the territory he called 'Greater Liberia'.⁴²

Other actors such as the Ivorian government of President Henri Konan Bedié are said to have benefited from these exports.⁴³ Ellis further argues that Bedié's predecessor, Felix Houphouët-Boigny's support for the NPFL rebellion in the early stages of the war, was "in part intended to wrest control of an economic resource, and in this he had the support particularly of French businesses anxious to gain access to Liberia's raw materials".⁴⁴

Rwanda

The genocide of April 1994, in which 1 million Rwandans were butchered in just 3 months, was viewed by some as the 'final solution' to the ongoing civil war. On 1st October 1990 between 1,500 and 2,000 members of the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) had launched an attack from southern Uganda where they had been living as exiles. Their target was the government of Hutu president, Juvenal Habyarimana, who had achieved his position via a palace coup in 1973 supported by northern Hutus, particularly members of his Bushiru clan from the Ruthengiri province of northern Rwanda. Like Doe in Liberia, Habyarimana and his allies quickly consolidated their power to the detriment of Tutsis, southern Hutus and those from rival clans. In fact, by 1980 80% of senior positions in the army were held by Bushiru Hutus.⁴⁵

Hutus and Tutsis have a long history of cohabitation, which in recent decades has become marked by tensions and consequently, violence. Many refer to Belgian colonial rule as a turning point in these relations. The Belgians introduced rigidities into the categories of 'Hutu' and 'Tutsi' which had previously been fluid. Furthermore, the colonial government chose to consolidate its power through Tutsi chiefs and thus, assigned members of this group to positions of power, providing them with privileged access to the state and economic opportunities.

By introducing the now-notorious identity cards, which facilitated the genocide in 1994, the colonial power ensured that identity would henceforth be based on ethnicity. These changes led to enduring bitterness among some elements of the Hutu population, particularly those in the north, leading to violence in the 1950s and a bloody revolution between 1959 and 1962, which left 20,000 Tutsis dead and drove hundreds of thousands more into exile. In this way the Hutu elites ensured that they would succeed the Belgian colonial power on the achievement of independence in 1962. Some commentators have claimed that this mass deportation of Tutsis, particularly to Uganda, was at the root of the civil war thirty years later.⁴⁶

The socio-economic context within which the war emerged must also be examined. By the 1980s Rwanda had the highest population density in Africa, but was among the poorest countries in the world, with declining land productivity. This was compounded by pervasive corruption, high unemployment, especially among the youth, leading to various forms of political unrest in the early 1990s. A short rainy season in 1989 led to widespread food shortages, and even famine in some areas in 1990. In addition to a deteriorating economy, coffee yields were diminishing and in July 1989 the world coffee prices slumped, which was particularly devastating for Rwanda, a coffee-producing country. Also in 1990 the Rwandan currency experienced a 40% devaluation due to the anticipation of the introduction of a structural adjustment programme by the World Bank and IMF.⁴⁷ Therefore, like Liberia, Rwandan society was on the verge of collapse when the outbreak of war pushed it over the edge.

To exacerbate an already devastating situation, Habyarimana and his coterie, many of whom were extremists, intensified their 'tribilization' of national politics. It was these extremists who were the architects, coordinators and controllers of the genocide between April and July 1994. Although the Western media depicted the genocide as a spontaneous outburst of ethnic violence by the Hutu masses, this was far from the truth. People had to be manipulated. Genocide had to be incited and organised. Not only was this mass slaughter prepared well in advance, but it was also a political act or technique, a 'final solution' to exterminate an entire racial group as well as Hutu opponents. As Berry and Berry put it,

In essence, the genocide in Rwanda had as much to do with tribalism as the Holocaust did in Europe. Both were organized and implemented by a small group of extremist politicians using every means possible to hold power. Unaccountable before the law, this small

group of individuals transformed racial extremism, oppression, and violence into legitimate means of exercising political authority.⁴⁸

Extremists in the government coordinating the genocide were able to do so by using fear and ignorance as their main tools to legitimate violence against Tutsis and others. Fear was instilled in the Hutu population, so much so that many came to believe that if the RPF invaded they would be killed, mutilated or even eaten alive by Tutsi soldiers.⁴⁹ Ignorance, the other main tool of the extremists, was forced on the population using mainly the infamous state-owned Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM). Misinformation and lack of information about both domestic and international events was central in the campaign to incite people to violence. Therefore, the socio-economic problems facing the Rwandan people as a whole and the 'tribilization' of politics by Habyarimana and the Hutu extremists in his government combined to produce yet another twentieth century genocide.

Conflict Patterns

The similarities between these three case studies are striking. Not only are their routes to, and patterns of, violent conflict almost uniform, but also, they highlight the grave political and economic factors inciting and prolonging conflicts. An assessment is proposed by Adedeji:

There is a growing evidence to support the view that the elites in African societies, particularly members of the political class, have shown no restraint in manipulating the people through feeding them with prejudices against and stereotypes about other ethnic groups to win their support for achieving their own self-centred objectives ... Personal interests and ambition of such leaders are framed in ethnic terms and the bells of ethnic solidarity are rung to rally group support even at the risk of developing animosity against another group which is considered the enemy. This sometimes degenerates into the incidence of people-to-people violence and pogroms.⁵⁰

It is fair to say that civil wars are not the products of arbitrary violence and barbarism by 'tribal' people but rather, they are the result of complex political and economic tensions. These tensions, in turn, create an environment in which children become targets for recruitment by both government forces and opposition groups.

CHAPTER TWO

CHILD COMBATANTS AND ADULT WARS IN AFRICA

A large proportion of child combatants are indeed to be found in Africa—at the heart of modern warfare. This chapter will explore the involvement of children in armed conflicts within the African context by analysing the extent of the ‘child soldier phenomenon’, methods of and reasons for recruitment, the treatment they receive and their contributions to armed forces and opposition groups as well as the consequences of their participation for themselves and the wider society.

The statistics are illustrative as outlined in Table 1. In Liberia, where under-eighteens make up 50% of the population, the NPFL established Small Boy Units who killed without question and on which the force was very dependent. An estimated 15,000 children became embroiled in that country’s conflict.⁵¹ Next door, in Sierra Leone which has one of the worst records of using children in war and where 50% of the population are under eighteen, more than 10,000 children served as soldiers for the various fighting factions⁵². Further south in Angola, children under the age of eighteen consist of 52% of the population but 3,000 were used in the conflict⁵³ and in Mozambique the figure was approximately between 8,000 and 10,000.⁵⁴ Towards the east in Uganda, where under eighteens represent an overwhelming 56% of the population of 20 million, between 8,000 and 10,000 children have been abducted in the north by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, who have been fighting the government since 1989.⁵⁵ Figures from Ethiopia, where under-eighteens form 53% of the population, are harder to elicit as the government vehemently denies the participation of children in its conflict with Eritrea, which began in May 1998. However, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers has received credible reports that thousands of children were forcibly recruited into the Ethiopian army, particularly during the build-up to the major offensive launched by Ethiopia in May 2000.⁵⁶ From these statistics there is no doubt that children involved in armed conflict have become a dominant feature of the African landscape.

Table 1: Proportion of Child Soldiers Deployed in Armed Conflicts across sub-Sahara Africa

Name of Country	Population	U-18s as % of Population	U-18s used in Armed Conflict
Liberia	2,467,000	50	15,000
Sierra Leone	4,428,000	50	10,000
Angola	11,569,000	52	3,000
Mozambique	18,265,000	51	8,000–10,000
Uganda	20,791,000	56	8,000–10,000
Ethiopia	60,148,000	53	N/A ⁵⁷

Source: Coalition to Stop the use of Child Soldiers, 2002

Demographic Profile of Child Soldiers

It is widely agreed that the groups of children particularly vulnerable to recruitment are those from:

- Poor or otherwise disadvantaged sectors of society;
- The actual conflict zones themselves;
- Disrupted or non-existent family backgrounds⁵⁸

The last group are said to be exceptionally susceptible to recruitment by armed groups because the family is supposed to provide “a measure of physical protection and assistance in strategies for avoiding recruitment”;⁵⁹ and once the family structure breaks down, this level of protection and assistance becomes more difficult to maintain. It is also important to draw a parallel between this group of children and those vulnerable to child labour during peacetime. Such a linkage has been referred to by both Brett and Nordstrom. According to Brett, “the categories of children most likely to be child labourers in peacetime are also the most likely to become child combatants in times of war.”⁶⁰ With regards specifically to the actual experiences of girls during war, Nordstrom claims that it becomes difficult to draw easy lines between wartime and peacetime: “what people tolerate in peace shapes what they will tolerate in war.”⁶¹

Forced recruitment

Both government forces and rebels have used (and continue to use) compulsory recruitment and coercion to involve children in conflict in defiance of the UNCRC and its Optional Protocol on children in armed conflict. Children have been abducted from their homes at night or from school or the fields during the day. It is essential to recognise that the lack of accurate birth registration, particularly in many rural areas across the continent leaves children under the age of eighteen at a high risk; without birth certificates, children cannot prove their immaturity, and thus can be more easily coerced to join an armed faction. One of the tactics used by the RUF when it invaded Sierra Leone was to capture youngsters as they attacked villages. In the Oromo region of Ethiopia, the year 1999 witnessed the closure of an unknown number of schools while heavy conscription took place. In the case of Liberia, boys were threatened with death either to themselves or their families; on one occasion an armed group threatened to beat a thirteen year-old boy with a cartridge belt.⁶²

Furthermore, recruiters deliberately destroy the bonds between their new recruits and their families and communities in order to end resistance from the communities and block the possibility of the children returning home. Mozambique and Angola are particularly illustrative case studies. In Mozambique, Mozambican National Resistance (Resistencia Nacional Mocambicana – RENAMO) soldiers forced new recruits to kill someone from their own village.⁶³ In Angola, where the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and government forces both forcibly recruited Rwandan refugee children who were living on the border as well as their own nationals, children fighting for UNITA were forced to kill their relatives and neighbours or to raid and loot their own villages. This was “done to cut links and eliminate the desire to escape and join family and community.”⁶⁴ The children were also forbidden to use their birth names, traditional names or nicknames that were related to their past experience with families and communities. Rather, they were given new war names such as ‘Rambo’, ‘the Russian’ and ‘the Invincible’, names given to boost their confidence and enhance their combative performance.⁶⁵

Child ‘volunteers’

Some authors have asserted that a substantial number of children make an active decision to participate in the conflict and ‘volunteer’ to join an armed group. McConnan’s research in Sierra Leone led her to claim that young ex-combatants

had "clear rational reasons for joining a militia force.... these are neither dupes nor victims."⁶⁶ Moreover, in some cases child recruits go beyond what they had been ordered to. In an Algerian village, for example, an eyewitness reported that not only were all the killers boys under the age of seventeen, but, that some twelve year-old boys had decapitated a fifteen year-old girl and played 'catch' with her head.⁶⁷

Although the reasons children 'volunteer' include a desire for revenge, adventure, fun-seeking, a sense of belonging and peer pressure, most of the evidence points to survival as the primary reason for enlisting. In Liberia, Human Rights Watch (HRW) discovered that although warring factions forcibly recruited children, most children joined for survival. According to HRW, only a small percentage of children reported being forced to join. One UN official in Liberia told HRW, "children went to fight because their economic situation was so bad."⁶⁸ Pentecostal Bishop, W Nah Dixon, supports this view,

Many of the Liberian youths who joined Charles Taylor's NPFL to overthrow the Doe administration saw the civil war as an opportunity to acquire property and riches... Their motives was not liberating the people but looting their properties by use of the gun.⁶⁹

In the case of Sierra Leone a substantial number of child soldiers joined the RUF, again, because they had no other means of survival.⁷⁰ The alternative to enlisting could be unemployment. Furthermore, it has been argued that the RUF bush camps offered alternative schooling for which many of the youngsters were grateful, as the formal education system had collapsed. Therefore, in their opinion offering their services to the rebels and thus participating in the rebellion, was a chance to resume their education.⁷¹ The reasons children 'volunteer' for war, then, are firmly situated within the socio-economic contexts within which wars emerge. With regards to Sierra Leone, Abdullah and Muana argue that:

Central to an understanding of the war in Sierra Leone is the role of alienated youth, especially lumpen youth in the urban and rural areas, for whom combat appears to be a viable survival alternative in a country with high levels of urban unemployment, where the economy is dominated by a precious mineral sector in long-term decline.⁷²

This point emphasises the importance of rehabilitating and restructuring the wider society in order for the rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers (or any other war-affected group) to be effective.⁷³

The link between the socio-economic context of war and the ‘volunteerism’ of children and youth has led some commentators to ‘problematise’ the concept of ‘voluntary’ recruitment. According to Machel, it would be misleading to consider children presenting themselves for service as ‘voluntary’ because, “rather than exercising free choice, these children are responding more often to a variety of pressures—economic, social and cultural.”⁷⁴ Poverty is said to be one of the most dominant pressures on child ‘volunteers’ because they believe that joining an armed group is the only way to ensure regular meals, clothing and medical attention. Therefore, “too great an implication of freedom of choice should not be associated with the term ‘voluntary’ in this context.”⁷⁵

Why children?

The use of children in numerous armed conflicts across the continent has led some commentators to infer that it is a legitimate African tradition and thus an inherent part of the culture. This section shall attempt to show why this inference is flawed and present an alternative approach.

A useful definition of ‘culture’ has been put forward by Bennett, who defines culture as follows:

Culture is an amorphous concept denoting anything that contributes to the unique character of a social group, thereby distinguishing it from other groups....It follows that culture may include artefacts, language, laws, customs and moral codes, in fact, a people’s entire intellectual and material heritage.⁷⁶

Tradition, in turn, is the vehicle in which cultural beliefs are exhibited to ‘outsiders’ as well as transmitted to future generations. The importance of culture in defining and understanding a group is evident. However, it must be recognised that traits that are assumed to be cultural to a group are not there *a priori*; they do not just drop from the sky nor do they simply emerge as a result of group consensus. A limited number of traits are selected, normally by elite groups (and sometimes, even by outsiders), as cultural emblems,⁷⁷ thus making culture a conscious construction instead of “a spontaneous outgrowth of community practice.” As a deliberate construction, then, it can be argued that culture is not a homogeneous entity that can be captured and kept static; rather, it is dynamic and therefore, prone to change. Thus, the distinctive features used as cultural symbols by a group change due to the fact that “values and priorities also change over time as new experiences are encountered and

previously unknown influences make people change the direction of their lives."⁷⁸ Furthermore, it is crucial to be aware that, as a conscious construction, culture can be manipulated by dominant forces in society, such as elites, to achieve a particular goal.

In order to attribute a particular practice to culture, it is important to test its normative value by examining its continuity or persistence over time.⁷⁹ In the case of child soldiering the findings are interesting: although from as early as the age of seven, African children in past societies were assigned duties and responsibilities, their use in conflict was not as prominent as appears to be the case in most African countries afflicted by war today:

Although the warriors of pre-colonial African armies would not have attained complete adult status, children were not recruited to regiments nor did they bear arms....At most, as in the case of the Zulu, children gave incidental support as non-combatants.⁸⁰

Just as Bennett argues that in pre-colonial African societies, co-opting relatively mature men was less a matter of principle than of pragmatism⁸¹, this study takes the view that co-opting children in modern conflicts is less a matter of culture and a dysfunctional (or lack of a) notion of childhood and more a matter of pragmatism, economics and demographics. Therefore, the use of African children in wars is not an inherent part of tradition and culture, not least for the following reasons: firstly, child soldiering is a global phenomenon and secondly, there is not simply one African tradition or culture but many, with diverse, and even disparate, features and norms.

Evidence supporting this is abundant. Apart from the easy availability of small, lightweight weaponry in conflicts of today, qualities particular to children facilitate their participation. Their comparative agility, small size, and the ease with which they can be physically and psychologically controlled, are regarded as advantages by military commanders.⁸² For example, the small size of children, as well as their agility and relative inconspicuousness, makes them good spies or messengers.

There is another dimension to consider that centres on the recruitment of children as part of a deliberate military strategy. Lacking confidence in its own army and in adults who did not respect the rules, the APC government of Sierra Leone conducted its recruitment among the youth of both sexes—many of whom were street children from Freetown who had previously been involved in petty theft. Therefore, by giving them an AK-47 “the government

gave them a chance to engage in theft on a larger scale.”⁸³ Civilians came to hate these children who shared the same background as the youthful recruits of the RUF and they were suspected of causing as much mayhem as the rebels; this led to the use of the term ‘sobel’: soldier by day, rebel by night.

The shortage of manpower also shapes the military strategy of both rebels and government forces. Mwizi Mthali of TransAfrica Forum argues that:

Long-running regional conflicts, poverty and an AIDS epidemic that has depleted the number of young men available to fight have made children and the military the strangest of bedfellows.⁸⁴

Those pointing to a shortage of manpower as a primary reason for the use of children in conflicts argue that this is evidenced by the fact that child recruitment is rare in the early stages of the conflict, but increases as the conflict progresses and the number of adult men dwindles.⁸⁵ This assertion is supported by Machel who provides information to show that the longer a conflict continues, the more likely it is that armed groups will turn to children to fill their ranks as their supplies of adult men are depleted.⁸⁶

Common roles for children to play are as porters, carrying loads of up to sixty kilograms, standing guard, manning checkpoints, acting as messengers or spies, laying and clearing landmines and stealing and foraging for food as well as performing household tasks such as cooking and cleaning. In addition, both boys and girls, but especially the latter, are often required to provide sexual services for older soldiers. Many children are also used in active combat; as soon as they are old enough to handle an assault rifle or a semi-automatic weapon (which is normally at the age of ten), children very often end up on the front line, in the heat of battle, drugged, killing and being killed. In the case of Sierra Leone a clear distinction was made among the child recruits; those who had some schooling were taken for armed training where they were indoctrinated with the RUF ideology whilst those who were uneducated were assigned manual tasks. The example of Uganda is also illustrative. At the main LRA base just across the border in Sudan, all children abducted from northern Uganda receive basic military training, including the use of small weaponry, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. After repetitive drilling in the use of weaponry, these *kadogos* (child soldiers) are sent to fight, loot villages for food or capture other children. It is important to note that ‘fighting’ often consists of children being forced “to run towards ‘the enemy’ thereby acting as a distraction and human shield for the adult rebels and their commanders. Those who retreat are beaten or killed, often by other children”⁸⁷

Children are treated in the same violent way as other recruits. Child combatants are often plied with drugs, alcohol and other hallucinogenic agents before battles in order to boost their courage. In Angola, children not only reported being given *liamba* (marijuana) and eating gunpowder to be strong, but, also being compelled to drink the blood of their victims in order to become both strong and fearless.⁸⁸

With regards to Mozambique, Boothby and colleagues have outlined the RENAMO process of 'socialization into violence', which included physical abuse, and humiliation, punishment for displaying feelings for victims, exposure to violence, drills and exercises, forced participation in killings and ritual initiation. The rationale for this treatment of their young recruits was that a brief period of mental terror and physical abuse allegedly produced particularly fierce warriors.⁸⁹

Similar reports have emerged from Liberia, where many child recruits were beaten if they resisted and tortured if they disobeyed orders. They were frequently beaten, flogged and subjected to a form of torture called *tabay*, previously described. Moreover, former child combatants reported being drugged on a mixture of cane juice and gun powder or with 'bubbles', an amphetamine that was supposed to make them feel 'strong and brave' for fighting at the front.⁹⁰ Children were also forced to rape, particularly upper-class women, at checkpoints. Additionally, some children were sodomised by older children or adults.⁹¹ This latter point, the homosexual rape of young boys during conflict, has received less attention than the experiences of girls.

Consequences of child soldiering on children and society

An article entitled, 'Boy Soldiers' published in Newsweek as a special report in August 1995, stated dogmatically:

Even if they survive the rigors of combat, it's often too late to salvage their lives. Unrelenting warfare transforms them into preadolescent sociopaths, fluent in the language of violence but ignorant of the rudiments of living in a civil society.⁹²

This sensationalist focus obscures the fact that the experiences of children as combatants during wars have profound consequences for both the individual child and for the wider society to which he or she belongs. These need to be addressed in the subsequent post-conflict period of reconciliation, rebuilding,

rehabilitation and reintegration. According to Dodge and Raundalen, “psychological wounds and trauma suffered in childhood may affect the individual child and, as a consequence, the society for decades.”⁹³

Educational consequences

Apart from a few instances where some kind of education is provided by armed groups in training camps, most child soldiers risk forfeiting their education at the outbreak of war. In fact, the educational institutions themselves are often destroyed. In the example of Sierra Leone, the RUF targeted property as well as civilians and burnt many schools and colleges. Thus, it fair to say that during conflict, opportunities to develop skills other than those of a military nature are few and far between for most children.⁹⁴ As a result of their limited education caused by war, child combatants returning to school in peacetime may be placed in classes with younger children. The further humiliation of having to struggle to keep up with these younger children often discourages ex-combatants from returning to school. From another perspective, teachers and parents may also object to “having former child soldiers enrol at all, fearing that they will have a disruptive effect on other children.”⁹⁵

Physical consequences

Besides dying in action, physical injuries resulting from conflict is expected for all soldiers; in fact, they can be referred to flippantly as an occupational hazard, but research has shown that children are at a greater risk than older and more experienced combatants. The younger the child the higher the risk of injury or death. According to Brett and McCallin, the most frequent references to specific injuries suffered by child soldiers are loss of hearing, loss of limbs and blindness.⁹⁶ All three injuries can affect the reintegration of children into their families, communities and society generally. Loss of sight or hearing can impede educational, vocational and social development whilst loss of limbs limits the potential for economic productivity, a quality highly valued by most post-war societies. Instead of contributing to the economic reconstruction of their worlds, these children are seen as being an added burden the community can ill-afford to bear. Thus, they are often marginalised or rejected. Other factors influencing the physical health of child combatants have been noted and include: sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), respiratory tract infections, worm infestations and other water-born diseases due to poor hygiene and lack of basic facilities.

Psychological consequences

There is a general consensus that the development of a child continues at all times, including during war, and is determined by his or her experiences at this time—be they positive or negative. Although, much contention surrounds the appropriateness of Western therapeutic models in non-Western societies, it is worth noting that during their research in Uganda, Sudan and Mozambique, Dodge and Raundalen identified Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in children and argue that the psychological effects of war on children can be described in terms of “psychological reaction patterns ranging from aggression and revenge (an aspect we think is exaggerated) to anxiety, fear, grief and depression.”⁹⁷ Furthermore, the use and abuse of children by armed groups can result in low self-esteem, feelings of guilt, violent behaviour, shame as well as lack of trust and confidence:

A 10 year-old who had been abducted by RENAMO, subjected to brutal training and ultimately forced to kill civilians and soldiers before escaping and finding refuge in a Maputo orphanage, was found to be suspicious of adults and suffering from “flashbacks” in which events from the past would come flooding back at unexpected moments to haunt him.⁹⁸

From interviews with children in the Gulu District of northern Uganda, Stavrou and Stewart noted that, even 5 years after escaping from the LRA, former male and female abductees continued to experience the following:

- sleeplessness, nightmares and flashbacks;
- an inability to cope with and a general fear of the unknown;
- unstable weight maintenance and poor self-image;
- ongoing depression and suicidal tendencies;
- sensitivity to strange or loud noises and sudden movements; and
- irritability either while at home, at school or at work.

Former boy soldiers further expressed other problems including:

- feelings of shame about past actions and of guilt about having survived while others died or continue to be in captivity;

- low self-esteem and hopelessness about the future;
- a lack of confidence in their ability to create a home or family, to make a living and to improve themselves;and
- anger at rebels for taking away their youth, at the government for doing nothing and at their communities for not understanding them.⁹⁹

Although the impact of sexual violence on girls has been relatively well documented, a great deal remains unknown about the long-term psychological effects on boys who have been sexually abused during conflict. Furthermore, the fact that children in armed factions were plied with drugs and alcohol in order for their combative performance to be enhanced worsens the situation.

Thus Graca Machel asserts that “a formerly cheerful twelve year-old may return home as a sullen, aggressive and alienated sixteen year-old.”¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless returning home to families and communities seems to be the main prescription issued in rehabilitation programmes, as there is a belief that re-attachment to families will assist in the rehabilitation and reintegration of a child into civil society. After all, it is believed that the initial separation from family at the inception of violence is at the heart of the ‘trauma’ suffered by a child soldier. Stavrou and Stewart use Uganda, where the family network is central to the fabric of society, to explain why this is so:

The severing of the link between the child and the parent and family has ramifications that go beyond the immediate stress or trauma. The family is the primary arena through which the process of socialisation occurs. This process is central to children’s learning about the world and their role within that world. Through interaction with the family and greater social environment, the individual becomes aware of the self and learns what is considered acceptable behaviour and what is not.¹⁰¹

At the same time it is important to consider the post-war state of this family. As mentioned earlier a disproportionate number of child soldiers come from poor, indigent and/or marginalised families and communities, the very people who bear the brunt of war and find themselves even more impoverished than at the beginning of the conflict. To compound their situation, it must not be forgotten that many child soldiers were forced to commit atrocities against members of their families and communities. Thus, the ‘sullen sixteen year-old’ returning home will find that his or her family has also changed:

Each member has had to develop survival strategies during the time in which she had been absent. Some members could have died, perhaps others had to turn to prostitution to survive, or had to betray important values to stay alive.¹⁰²

It can, therefore, be inferred from this examination of the experiences of children in armed conflicts that “embedded in the nature of today’s armed conflicts is an onslaught on childhood itself.”¹⁰³ This onslaught on childhood within the African context has arguably produced a ‘scarred generation’ who are expected to become the leaders, drivers of economic well-being and the future of the continent.¹⁰⁴ It is for this reason that this study argues that child soldiering is creating, in many parts of Africa, a dysfunctional notion of childhood and thus affecting culture, a dynamic and evolving process, rather than the reverse being true.

CHAPTER THREE

GIRL SOLDIERS

Just as child soldiering is not a newly developed phenomenon being witnessed in the latter days of the 20th century and the dawn of the next, neither is 'girl soldiering'. Mazurana and colleagues refer to Joan of Arc as the best-known Western girl combatant in history. In 1429 sixteen year-old Joan led an army of 4,000 against the English and successfully expelled them from Orleans.¹⁰⁵ However, her victory was short-lived as the following year she was captured by Burgundian soldiers and sold to the English who proceeded to burn her at the stake—a form of execution meted out to all suspected 'witches'. More recent examples of girls participating in armed conflicts are available. During the First World War fourteen year-old Marina Yurlova found herself at the front lines of battle as a private in the Cossack army, which was used by the Western front in Europe (against Germany and Austro-Hungary). Around the same time thousands of miles away another fourteen year-old girl, Jesusa Palancares, joined her father to spy for the *federales* during the Mexican revolution.¹⁰⁶ African history also yields tales of girl fighters. In fact, Mazurana and colleagues claim that "the most intriguing historical female army comes from the African kingdom of Dahomey" which is present-day Benin.¹⁰⁷ During the 18th and 19th centuries the people of Dahomey are said to have regarded female warriors as superior to their male counterparts. Therefore, every three years fathers had to report to the king with daughters aged between nine and fifteen years in order for the fittest to be selected for military duty. In this way the strength of the royal female forces was maintained.

Not only does the practice of using girls in conflicts around the world continue today, but so does the silence enshrouding this phenomenon. International discussions, peace accords, reports, studies and demobilisation and rehabilitation programmes all use the generic term 'child soldiers' to describe children involved in armed conflicts and then proceed to focus primarily on boys as combatants. Girls are largely forgotten, ignored or dismissed. If lucky, they will be acknowledged as an appendage, an after-thought in a concluding paragraph or an appendix in the deepest recesses of a report or book. This view is supported by Vincent in the following statement, "there is little awareness of the dimensions of the suffering inflicted on girls, or of the many roles

they play during conflict”¹⁰⁸ or of their experiences with their ‘war-related’ or ‘war-spawned’ offspring after conflict. It is widely agreed among commentators and practitioners that girl combatants are still very much out of the picture; if child soldiers as a whole are arguably ‘invisible’, then girls simply disappear out of sight. Nordstrom describes the situation appositely:

When I started looking for girls in numerous war situations, I found silences and empty spaces, punctuated only sporadically by a handful of researchers focusing on children in general and girls in particular.¹⁰⁹

It is pivotal that more research is conducted on the particular needs and experiences of girl combatants during war and its aftermath in order to address their marginalisation both in the discourse and in field-based programmes. This section hopes to contribute to a gender-analytical framework on the involvement of children in armed conflict by examining the extent of the ‘girl soldier phenomenon’, methods of recruitment, reasons behind their recruitment by both government forces and armed opposition groups, the treatment they receive and their contributions to armed forces and opposition groups as well as the implications of their participation for themselves and the wider society. Underpinning this section are the following questions: to what extent is the deployment of girls in civil wars condoned by African cultures? And how does the phenomenon of ‘girl soldiering’ affect the various cultures experiencing conflict?

Case studies from El Salvador, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Uganda show that girls comprise one-third of all child soldiers.¹¹⁰ In Angola and Sierra Leone, girls are said to have consisted of between 30% and 40% of child combatants whilst in Kurdistan they made up 10% and in Northeast India, between 6%-7%. The Shining Path in Peru is reported to have one of the “largest female contingents of any armed group in the world.”¹¹¹ In Sri Lanka, young Tamil girls, often orphans, have been systematically recruited by the opposition, Tamil Tigers, since the mid 1980s. In fact, in recent recruitment drives in schools the LTTE have focused on girls. Ironically, the group insists that this is its way of “assisting women’s liberation and counteracting the oppressive traditionalism of the present system.”¹¹²

African countries where girls are used by either government forces or armed opposition groups or both include Angola, Burundi, DRC, Eritrea Ethiopia, Liberia, Libya, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Uganda. In Angola, girls as young as thirteen years have reportedly been used by UNITA rebels whilst in Uganda, of the 183 child soldiers recaptured from the armed

opposition group, 55 were girls.¹¹³ Furthermore, research indicates that girls are more likely to be found in armed opposition groups than in governmental forces.¹¹⁴ One apparent exception is Sierra Leone where evidence points to the recruitment of girls as well as boys by the APC government, some of whom proved highly effective combatants.¹¹⁵

Methods of recruitment

Methods used to recruit girls into various armed factions are numerous. The participation of girls may be the result of:

- compulsory military service (for example, Cuba and the Philippines);
- abduction or gang-pressing (for example, Angola, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Colombia);
- being born into or adopted by an armed opposition group (for example, Colombia, Sri Lanka and Uganda);
- being sold or given to armed forces by a parent as a form of a 'tax' payment or due to social rejection (for example, Colombia and Cambodia);
- 'volunteerism' because of a desire for protection, survival, to earn an income, further career options, including those relating to the government or military, or because of state violence against families and communities (for example, DRC, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Colombia).

In the last decade girls have become the targets of active recruitment by armed groups in many countries afflicted by conflicts. In Mozambique REN-AMO promised study-abroad scholarships in order to attract adolescent girls and boys into its forces but very few of these scholarships ever materialised. Uganda provides more recent and better-known examples: On 10th October 1996, 139 girls were abducted from St. Mary's College at Aboke in Apac District, northern Uganda by members of the LRA. International attention became focused on this case when the Italian deputy headmistress of the school, Sister Rachel, followed the abductors and managed to secure the release of the majority of the girls.

Like their male peers, many girls make an active decision to participate in conflict and 'volunteer' with an armed group, for numerous reasons, including the

fact that having a gun is likely to provide greater protection against rape and other abuses. In Sierra Leone, one young female member of the RUF proffered her reasons for joining the group succinctly and simply, "they offered me a choice of shoes and dresses. I never had decent shoes before."¹¹⁶ In Ethiopia, "an increasing number of young girls were looking at the armed forces....as a means of winning their living in the context of widespread unemployment."¹¹⁷ Furthermore, according to a recent report produced by Refugees International in eastern DRC, the choices facing girls (and boys) are, "to join the military, become a street child, or die."¹¹⁸ Many girls also join armed groups in order to escape from domestic abuse and exploitation (by a parent, step-parent or other relative).

Why girls?

Very often girls are recruited for the same reasons as their male peers—for the very qualities that they possess as children, outlined in the previous section. Just as the shortage of manpower leads to the recruitment of child soldiers generally, it also results in an increased proportion of girls among the child soldiers.¹¹⁹ However, it is necessary to go beyond this explanation and ask: what further qualities do girls possess that render them appealing to armed groups? In Sri Lanka, where the Tamil Tigers use suicide bombing as a vital war tactic, girls are recruited because it is easier for them to evade government security.¹²⁰ This reason also applies to armed opposition groups not necessarily using suicide bombing as a war tactic elsewhere, including many African countries currently or recently embroiled in conflict.

It is important to consider another dimension. Just as in the wider society, men are seeking younger and younger sexual partners in order to avoid HIV/AIDS infection, rebels are recruiting younger girls for the same reasons. This further emphasises the view that many wartime practices reflect the attitudes and practices of peacetime society. According to Terburgh, "such rebels are forcibly 'recruiting' young girls with no minimum age of recruitment. Once a girl shows emerging breasts, she is considered ripe for recruitment and for being handed over to a rebel as a 'wife'"¹²¹ Brett and McCallin add to this view when they claim, "the recruitment of young girls may be a deliberate attempt to provide 'wives' free from HIV infection, thus the criteria used for 'marrying' girls to rebel men seems to be a sign of puberty."¹²²

The importance of girls to armed opposition groups is glaring. Sierra Leone, a country currently in the process of building peace and reconstructing its society,

is a good case study to consider. Between 1992 and 1996 the majority of inhabitants of RUF camps in Sierra Leone were girls. In fact, whilst it was estimated that up to 80% of all RUF forces were children between the ages of seven and fourteen, 30% of that figure were girls.¹²³ According to a recent statement made by Chris Robertson, the head of Save the Children's Fund (SCF) in Sierra Leone, "negotiating the release of girls is a lot harder than boys."¹²⁴ Whilst boy combatants are of little value in the post-war period because they performed largely combatant roles, armed groups are reluctant to release girls, despite the fact that the fighting has terminated. The RUF continues to use abducted girls as domestic workers and 'wives'.

In a bid to enter peace talks with the government in 2001, the RUF released hundreds of children in summer 2001. The month of May was particularly notable as shown in Table 4.1.

The disproportionate number of girls released is particularly surprising because, as previously mentioned 30% of RUF forces were comprised of girls. Sometimes RUF commanders formed 'strong' bonds with their female captives, telling child protection agents that they wanted to marry them. In turn, some of the girls in RUF camps claimed to be in love with their captors and did not want to return home.¹²⁶ In the case of Liberia, girl combatants consisted of only 1% of all child soldiers demobilised¹²⁷ but this does not necessarily mean that the number of girls used in the Liberian war by various armed factions was insignificant; like in Sierra Leone, it may also be related to the reluctance of armed groups to release girls after the conflict has officially ended. According to a report produced by UNICEF/Liberia,

Table 2: Child Soldiers Released from Revolutionary United Front, 2001.¹²⁵

Date	Boys released	Girls released
17 May 2001	110	0
20 May 2001	86	2
26 May 2001	581	10
29 May 2001	421	3
Total	1198	15

Source: Mazurana et al, 1998.

In the time leading up to peace, and immediately following the conflict, females were probably of more use to the factions than the boys who were no longer fighters. Girls could still prepare food, clean, fetch water, take care of the younger children and generally keep house....there was little opportunity, then, to reach out to the girls and bring them into the [Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration] process.¹²⁸

Girls are often subjected to the same dangers and mistreatment as boys including tough physical training schedules and harsh living conditions.

Most commentators refer to girls working behind the scenes, as supporters and ancillary workers and as a result they are less visible and thus, less accessible for demobilisation programmes which is certainly the case for some. However, it is important to recognise from the outset that there are no fixed roles assigned to girls based on gender. The functions girls play are fluid and often overlap. This notwithstanding, *some* of the roles that *some* girls play in *some* armed groups reflect the different socialisation process for girls and boys in the wider society; for example, cooking, cleaning, child care and rearing. At the same time many of the functions carried out by girls during conflict are similar to those undertaken by their male colleagues; like boys, girls are used as porters, cooks, servants, spies to collect and provide information as well as to loot villages during raids. In Angola, girls as young as thirteen years old were used as porters, camp followers and concubines.¹²⁹

Indeed, girls in armed groups are often required to render sexual services and the majority are abducted for the primary purpose of serving as 'wives' to the male soldiers. Again, the sexual violence confronted by girls during war can be viewed as a reflection of peacetime attitudes. With regard specifically to Sierra Leone, it has been argued that fighters were products of a society that had reinforced patriarchal values for centuries: that the lives of women were not important and that they were placed on this earth for the sexual fulfilment of men.¹³⁰

Many commentators have documented these experiences of girls as victims of sexual violence in-depth. This has been criticised by Mazurana and colleagues because, in their opinion, an exclusive focus on these 'worst-case scenarios' has the effect of obscuring "the complexities within and extent to which girls serve in a variety of overlapping roles."¹³¹ Part of the reason for their argument is that the sexual abuse of girl soldiers is not a prerequisite feature of all armed groups using girls; for example, there is no evidence that girls

are systematically required to provide sexual services in the LTTE (Sri Lanka) or the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK - Turkey). Thus, they argue that it is pivotal to consider the roles of girls in armed groups holistically or contextually within specific armed conflicts, geopolitical and cultural contexts, time periods, countries or region.¹³² This view is supported by Brett who argues that,

Even in situations of widespread abduction it should not be assumed that all girl soldiers have been sexually exploited; to do so is to deny their individual experiences and treat them as a category of actual or potential sexual objects. It also risks further stigmatizing the girls and thus limiting their future prospects and status in society.¹³³

Thus, focusing predominately on the sexual abuse experienced by girls reinforces social stereotypes and exacerbates their already fragile position during the rehabilitation and reintegration period. It is also important to recognise that gender does not dictate the enforcement of girls in sexual servitude. Although many girls were used in this way in Liberia and Uganda whilst the majority of boys were used in active combat, the reverse is also true in these two countries. That is to say, some boys were used as sex slaves whilst some girls were taken to the front line to engage in battle.¹³⁴

Like their male counterparts, a significant number of girls do indeed participate actively in conflict and fight on the front lines. A sixteen year-old girl in eastern DRC outlined her experiences of conflict as follows:

My sister and I joined the army because our parents were dead, and we had no jobs. I went to the front lines many times, and my sister was sent to the enemy to be a spy. Girls were sent to be prostitutes and get information from the enemy.¹³⁵

As a result of the participation of girls in active combat they experience considerable amounts of power and sometimes participate in abducting or press-ganging other children into armed groups as well as punishing and executing fellow child soldiers. Examples of African countries where this has taken place are Uganda, Liberia and Sierra Leone. In Uganda the evidence suggests that the braver girls participate fully in the war; a few have even been able to attain positions of command.¹³⁶ In Liberia, girls were also supplied with drugs and according to the ex-combatants themselves, interviewed by Krijn Peters as part of a study by Save the Children, the girls who fought alongside the boys at the frontline were tough and excellent fighters and in return, they received a considerable amount of respect and were not exploited as easily as those

working in ancillary roles.¹³⁷ This leads Twum-Danso to ask the question: as this picture goes against the traditional image of the roles played by girls within various African communities, how does this factor affect the reintegration process?¹³⁸

Consequences of girl soldiering on girls and the wider society

In addition to suffering the same consequences of armed conflict as boy soldiers and other children generally, girl combatants face further challenges due to their combined role as girls and fighters and thus, have specific needs that need to be considered in demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

In the 1996 UN study on children in armed conflict, Machel, emphasised the main public health effects of armed conflicts specifically for girls and women. These are notably pregnancy and its possible birth complications, made worse by the widespread practice of female genital infibulation in many African countries. Other factors include abortions (a decision in which the mother often has no say) and its own associated complications. This situation is compounded by the lack of health facilities and medical infrastructure in many war-torn countries. In addition to emphasising the public health problems mentioned above, the use of girls as sex slaves and 'wives' leads to a high incidence of STDs including HIV/AIDs. In fact, nearly 100% of girl abductees who escaped the LRA in Uganda are said to have sexually transmitted infections.¹³⁹ Girls who have been raped and forced into sexual servitude suffer from abdominal pains, cervical tearing, bleeding and infections, which can result in the increased risk of STDs. This, in turn, can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease. Furthermore, as infectious diseases can often be passed onto the offspring of the girls during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding, the physical effects of their abuse is passed on to the next generation. In addition, adolescent girl soldiers frequently suffer from loss of menstruation due to malnutrition and trauma.

Psychological effects of conflict on girls are said to differ from those on boys to an extent. Girls who have experienced sexual violence also suffer from shock, shame, low self-esteem, poor concentration, persistent nightmares and depression. However, according to Mazurana and colleagues, girls tend to withdraw more than boys who are more likely to behave with aggression.¹⁴⁰

Girls who have been abducted by armed groups and sexually abused during conflict are often rejected by their communities and find no support there.

According to an aid worker in Sierra Leone, “families don’t want a rebel child”¹⁴¹; the fact that they were forced into service with the RUF often appears to be immaterial. Counsellors at World Vision/Uganda, related experiences of fathers rejecting their daughters because they had been ‘tainted’ by their abusers and as a result, it was believed that they had definitely lost all prospects for marriage. With nowhere to turn, these children often become sex workers. What future do these girls and their children have without family or societal support? The psyche of girl combatants is further assaulted by stigmatisation and taunts in which they are referred to as ‘used goods’ that have lost their taste. Their children, who have been born as a result of rape, are often branded as ‘children of hate’ or ‘children of bad memories’¹⁴² and suffer from stigmatisation and rejection similar to that experienced by their teenage mothers. In some cases these children are then spurned by their own mothers. According to counsellors in Gulu Town, Uganda, the increase in street children in the capital, Kampala, could partly be due to abandoned children born to girls used as sex slaves. Although difficult to corroborate, a focus group discussion with sex workers, also in Kampala, raised the same point.¹⁴³

Additionally, girls who participate in conflicts as active combatants also confront severe challenges reintegrating into family and society. According to Brett and McCallin, many young women, whose identities were forged in combat, may have to conceal the role they played in conflict and, “for fear of total rejection by their husband’s family, must pretend to be the gentle, soft-spoken and submissive woman that their civilian counterpart is.”¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, it has been argued that the participation of girls and women in conflict can have some positive consequences in the post-war period. In Sierra Leone, the war is seen to have brought opportunities to this group; more women are heads of households as a result of the conflict and a change in gender relations, whereby women can negotiate more effectively, has been noted.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, it is important to bear in mind the findings of a recent report produced by the Quaker UN Office entitled, *‘The Voices of Girl Soldiers’*:

These girls exhibited a strong sense of self or they would not have survived. They often felt broken and alone but ultimately not severed from some fundamental sense of who they were or who they could become. Even when stripped of the outward signs of their identity and forced to participate in abusive relationships they were able to maintain some sense of self. They often acted fearless when terrified, and stood up for themselves in the face of brutal treatment and consequences. They lived with contradictions and intense feelings of ambivalence about supporting the movement and being recognized

for their accomplishments and at the same time being perpetrators of violence. They wanted to be someone and they longed to be valued. The girls continue to pursue life recognizing that once others knew that they had served in armed movements, even when it was against their will, they would be viewed as untrustworthy and generally diminished in the minds of others.¹⁴⁶

In light of this brief review, it is fair to conclude that just as in the case of boys, the use of girls by armed groups in war is due more to socio-economic and pragmatic considerations and less to culture. Moreover, this section has particularly emphasised the notion that child soldiering changes culture. In the case of girls some positive consequences of their active participation in conflict, such as their empowerment, is evident.

CONCLUSION

This monograph attempts to build a conceptual framework for the study of the use of children in armed conflict. Whilst chapter one provided a comprehensive review of the child soldier phenomenon by placing it within a historical, global and legislative framework, it was emphasised that it was after the end of the Second World War that the use of children in armed conflicts became a prominent feature in modern society, facilitated by the changing nature of war and the emergence of lightweight weapons. Furthermore, although the global nature of child soldiering was examined, it was necessary to go further and consider, in chapter two, the political and economic factors inciting and prolonging many African conflicts, which, in turn, lead to the participation of children in violence.

As various armed groups in Africa use significant numbers of children, it was then important, in chapter two, to consider the process in which they are recruited by armed groups, the reasons behind their use, the functions they perform and the treatment they receive. As it is a widely acknowledged that the development of children continues at all times, the study analysed the impact of their involvement in war on themselves and their society, focusing particularly on educational, physical and psychological consequences.

Finally, there is a general consensus that the subject of girl soldiers has been relegated to the 'back benches' of the child soldier debate—both in theoretical discourses and programme—related discussions. Therefore, it was essential for this study to document, in some depth, the experiences confronted by this group during war and its aftermath both as victims and active combatants.

The involvement of children in armed conflict in various African countries is a broad subject and this monograph has covered aspects that will be further developed and added to the existing literature and conceptual framework. Having argued the case for the pragmatic and economic considerations behind the use of children in conflicts and the impact of child soldiering on the numerous cultures affected by war, there is clearly still a need for validation from further fieldwork. Moreover, it would be interesting to research the

extent to which wartime practices and patterns reflect peacetime attitudes. By focusing particularly on the treatment of girls in different contexts, similarities emerge that enable us to appreciate the special requirements of girls in rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. Secondly, a study on the notion of 'childhood' focusing on the dialectical aspects of cultural relativity and universality would be a useful contribution to the existing literature. If notions of what a child is vary across cultures, what are the implications for the UNCRC, arguably the most universal of all international legal instruments?

Although children have indeed become a feature of most conflicts across the continent within the last twenty years, it is less a matter of 'African culture' (there is a great diversity of cultures throughout the continent) and more a matter of socio-economic and political factors. In fact, if child soldiers can be linked to culture at all, then it is likely to be a global culture driven by socio-economic and political pragmatism. Moreover, the consequences of child soldiering have affected various cultures afflicted by violence and created a notion of childhood that, some may call, 'dysfunctional'. This observation is of particular concern. Although childhood should by no means be considered simply a training ground for adulthood, children socialized in extreme violence are the future. A holistic approach encompassing both the socio-economic and political factors inciting conflicts and facilitating the involvement of children in them is vital for the successful prevention of child recruitment. Successful disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes depend on an understanding of how and why children are co-opted into violence.

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